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SUBJECT: NICARAGUAN ATLANTIC COAST ELECTIONS: PLC GARNERS
MOST VOTES, CSE HAS ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

REF: A. MANAGUA 0485

- 1B. MANAGUA 0464 AND PREVIOUS
- 1C. MANAGUA 0355
- 1D. MANAGUA 0212

11. (U) Summary: Belying early predictions of an FSLN victory in the March 5 regional council elections for the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) and South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS), the PLC surged ahead as late returns from rural voting centers were added to the vote count. The FSLN remained in second place in both regions, while indigenous party Yatama came in third in the RAAN, and Eduardo Montealegre's ALN-PC took third in the RAAS. All other parties, including Herty Lewites' MRS, trailed behind winning negligible percentages of the vote. The PLC lowered expectations before the elections with a calculated media campaign accusing the FSLN and Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) of fraudulent activities and blaming Montealegre for dividing the Liberal vote and contributing to a projected FSLN victory. The PLC's shrill tone quieted considerably by March 6, when a more complete vote count showed the party ahead in both regions. Ultimately, all parties accepted the results of the elections.

12. (SBU) Summary continued: The environment on election day was calm and orderly, despite some earlier threats of violence in Bluefields and the Mining Triangle (RAAN: Rosita, Bonanza, Siuna). Over 94 percent of voting tables (JRVs) opened on time, with the proper equipment, and representation from the competing political parties' official poll watchers (fiscales). Although observers did not detect systematic fraud, they noted problems and difficulties regarding the training of poll workers, equipment malfunctions and other issues, and confusion regarding JRV assignments. While the CSE managed to execute elections that will not likely face serious challenges by the political parties and civil society, the organization has considerable room for improvement before the November national elections. End Summary.

PLC COMES OUT AHEAD, BUT LOSES GROUND IN THE RAAS TO LIBERAL RIVALS

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13. (U) The following is a rank-ordered comparison of the performance of each party in the 2006 and 2002 regional elections. (Note: The 2006 vote numbers are based on 92% of JRV reports. The PRN, a constituent party of the ALN-PC

contested the 2002 elections. End Note.)

North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN):

PARTY	2006 VOTE	2002 VOTE
PLC	20,923 (35.9%)	16,584 (36.3%)
FSLN	17,942 (30.7%)	14,961 (32.7%)
Yatama	11,769 (20.2%)	9,837 (21.5%)
ALN-PC (PRN)	3,149 (5.4%)	1,109 (2.4%)
MRS	1,373 (2.4%)	N/A
PAMUC	1,251 (2.1%)	3,240 (7.1%)
APRE	1,197 (2.1%)	N/A
CCN	746 (1.3%)	N/A

South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS):

PARTY	2006 VOTE	2002 VOTE
PLC	15,968 (47.0%)	17,245 (62.4%)
FSLN	7,248 (21.4%)	7,272 (26.3%)
ALN-PC (PRN)	5,371 (15.8%)	1,425 (5.2%)
Yatama	3,169 (9.3%)	1,727 (6.2%)
MRS	1,302 (3.8%)	N/A
CCN	660 (1.9%)	N/A
APRE	225 (0.7%)	N/A
PAMUC	N/A	N/A

¶4. (SBU) The PLC is down slightly in the RAAN compared to 2002, while the FSLN appears to have lost about two points. While still winning by a comfortable margin in the RAAS, a traditional stronghold, the PLC ceded a significant number of votes to the ALN-PC. PAMUC, an indigenous rights party formed largely by Yatama dissidents, virtually disappeared despite discontent within the Miskito population regarding the flirtation of Yatama's leadership with the FSLN.

(Comment: Disgruntled Miskitos likely defected to the reformist ALN-PC or MRS rather than support a defunct PAMUC. End Comment.)

¶5. (U) The RAAN and RAAS are each composed of 15 electoral districts that elect three councilors each, for a total of 45 per Region, to the regional councils. The multi-member district proportional representation system allocates seats in successive rounds via an electoral quotient formula, as proscribed in Articles 147-149 of the Electoral Law. Large parties and parties with geographically concentrated support have a disproportional advantage under this system. As a result, Yatama is projected to win more seats in the RAAS than the ALN-PC despite capturing a smaller percentage of the total vote. Analysts at La Prensa project that in the RAAS, the PLC will win 19 seats, with 12 for the FSLN, 9 for Yatama, and 5 for the ALN-PC. In the RAAN, La Prensa estimates 18 seats for the PLC, 16 for the FSLN and 11 for Yatama. El Nuevo Diario, a rival publication, estimates that in the RAAS, the PLC will take 22 seats, with 14 for the FSLN, 5 for Yatama, and 4 for the ALN-PC. In the RAAN, El Nuevo Diario projects 16 seats for the FSLN, 15 for the PLC, and 14 for Yatama. The parties are currently in the strategic process of filing official complaints with the CSE regarding supposed "irregularities" at JRVs whose votes they hope to invalidate in order to gain an advantage.

¶6. (SBU) The Nicaraguan press trumpeted the abstention rate as the most notable feature of the elections. At an estimated 55-60 percent, the abstention rate was high, but actually registered a small improvement over 2002, when 62.5 percent of the population declined to vote. In addition, the abstention rate is based on the total number of people registered in the padron, even though the padron is acknowledged by all parties to contain a high percentage of invalid registrants (including those who have died, emigrants, prisoners, etc.) Some NGOs criticized the CSE for failing to promote the regional elections, but most of the blame lies with the inept regional councils themselves, which have failed to constructively implement autonomy for the Atlantic Coast or improve the daily lives of Coastal citizens.

RESPONSE: EVERYONE IS A WINNER, EXCEPT HERTY

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¶ 7. (U) The PLC and the FSLN both proclaimed a "victory" in the regional elections. The PLC proclaimed itself "satisfied" with winning a plurality of votes in both Regions and indicated that the party would seek alliances with Yatama and/or the ALN-PC to control both Councils. Likewise, the FSLN announced that it would ally with Yatama to form a controlling bloc in both regions. Yatama says it will do what is best for the Atlantic Coast regions and aspires to the RAAN governorship.

¶ 8. (U) ALN-PC presidential candidate Eduardo Montealegre declared himself "satisfied" with the results of the elections, having captured about 10 percent of the total vote after a relatively short campaign. Montealegre complained about the smear campaign conducted against him by the PLC, claiming that PLC leaders spent more time fighting the ALN-PC than the Sandinistas.

¶ 9. (U) MRS candidate Herty Lewites accepted the results of the elections, complimenting MRS officials for defending their votes and CSE officials for conducting orderly elections. Lewites admitted that he "took a hit" in the Atlantic Coast elections, but insisted that "Herty 2006" would do much better in the national elections.

CSE: ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

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¶ 10. (SBU) In general, election day was tranquil and orderly. Observers noted a strong security presence including military and police officials who effectively maintained stability throughout the day. The CSE provided multilingual staff and elections materials in Spanish, Miskito and English, and the JRVs were well-attended by fiscales. On March 6, the OAS released a statement praising the CSE's "seriousness" and "professionalism" despite "political difficulties encountered prior to the elections period" (Ref B). The missive lamented the "low participation of the electorate" while recognizing the "well-ordered" environment in which the elections took place. Leaders of local NGOs that participated in

observations, such as IPADE, Etica y Transparencia and the Movimiento por Nicaragua, also acknowledged the overall successful execution of the elections.

¶ 11. (SBU) Embassy observers, likewise, did not notice systematic acts of fraud or willful tampering with the electoral process. However, they detected problems related to the training of poll workers that prevented citizens from voting as well as equipment deficiencies and irregular exclusions of observers.

The following is a summary of problems noted by Embassy and NGO observers:

- Lack of Poll Worker Training. One Embassy observer noted that about half of the poll workers in her electoral district seemed competent and comfortable with rules and procedures, while the other 50 percent struggled and occasionally caused problems for voters. Some JRVs opened late, causing frustrated citizens to leave before voting. Other JRVs advised people to keep searching for the voting table where they were registered, again resulting in frustration.
(Comment: One observer reported that as many as 15-20 percent of potential voters in the Puerto Cabezas area may have given up trying to vote after multiple JRV rejections. However, all observers noted that Article 41 was widely respected if citizens asserted their right to vote with a valid cedula, even if they did not appear on the voting list. End Comment.)

- Deficient Equipment. Observers reported use of poor-quality ink that is barely noticeable, especially on dark-skinned people. Some JRV & inkers8 were inking left thumbs instead of right, and even providing voters with

tissues to wipe off &excess8 ink. One police officer in Siuna was witnessed wiping off the ink behind a tree using a clear liquid before driving off on his motorcycle. JRVs possessed a "blacklight" that poll workers theoretically could use to detect ink, though most were inoperable or simply not used.

As with the 2004 municipal elections, the hole punchers used to punch cedulas did not function properly. Mesa directive members and fiscales seemed to anticipate this problem (from their previous experience in the municipal elections) and quickly decided to abandon the hole punchers in most instances. One observer reported that a Municipal Electoral Council official claimed that the hole punchers were only supposed to create an impression, not a perforation (false). (Comment: Deficiencies with the ink and hole punchers combined with application of Article 41 create a greater possibility for multiple voting by trained party militants. End Comment.)

- Exclusion of Observers. While the exclusion of observers was not widespread or systematic, it did occur in several instances, especially with local observation teams. In some instances, CSE officials or international observers convinced JRVs to allow local observers to have access. The most glaring example of observer exclusion was in Managua, where CSE officials at the national vote counting center refused to allow observers inside, including one member of the Embassy's team. Poloff contacted senior CSE manager Rodrigo Barreto to inquire about the situation, and Barreto said that a space in the Intercontinental Hotel was reserved for Managua observers, where they could wait for the official announcement of results from CSE president Roberto Rivas.

COMMENT: LOOKING TO NOVEMBER

¶12. (SBU) Several observers commented that the presence of international and national observer teams aided significantly in enforcing voter rights, especially in some JRVs that may have been inclined to ignore Article 41. A pervasive observer presence is essential to foment the same type of open and by-the-book environment for the national elections in November. Emboffs and CEPPS partners will continue working with the CSE to improve training for poll workers and CSE officials, provide appropriate equipment, produce and distribute cedulas, and encourage Nicaraguans to vote.

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